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Fontana View homeowners get Firewise certification

By Lauren Dunn
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Last year alone, Forest Ranger Benji Reece says there were 18 wild fires — one that burnt down a camper — and as many as 40 the year before. A majority of which, Reece says, could have been prevented or controlled better.

When the Fontana View homeowners association heard a presentation by Reece in 2007, the primarily vacation-home community went to work right away making safety their top priority. As a token of their hard work, on Friday, Jan. 13, Fontana View was awarded an NC Firewise Certification.

“I live here, and when you live out in the middle of the woods you appreciate (The NC Forest Services),” Homeowners Association President Mike Shakar said. “So when they tell you that you ought to be doing something, it’s probably a good thing to do.”

Reece said the certification is an honor only about 22 other communities in North Carolina are awarded. It means that Fontana View Properties is now a community that “by working with neighbors, individual residents make their own property — and their neighborhood — much safer from the flames and embers of a wildfire,” according to the Web site.

To qualify for the NC Firewise Certification, Fontana View had to obtain a wildfire risk assessment from the NC Forest Service, conduct a “Firewise Day,” invest an amount of profit into local Firewise actions and submit an application to the state Firewise association.

“They’ve done quite a bit,” Reece said. “They have to donate \$2 per capita, and that could be man hours, work hours or money. They’ve had to improve access and start clearing around homes.”

First on the list was establishing an ease of access to the private, gated community. Shakar and the homeowners association’s board of directors made some alterations to

their one-lane road.

“We’ve built turn outs, so basically trucks can get by,” Shakar said. “In an emergency, you don’t want a truck that’s carrying water up the mountain to have to back up and make room for somebody or for people trying to get out of harm’s way to not be able to.”

Next up, though it hasn’t been done yet, are the prescribed burns. Under the supervision of the NC Forest Service and funded by the NC Firewise grant that Fontana View now qualifies for, Shakar says the first round will, with luck, start next month.

“We will come in and
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Forest ranger Benji Reece awards Homeowners Association President Mike Shakar and Tim Stamey of the board of directors with their NC Firewise certification and community sign. (Lauren Dunn)

Firewise: Designation ‘the right thing to do’

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establish firelines where we will just come through and burn everything,” Reece said. “That way, we reduce the fuel and we reduce the intensity of the fire in case there’s ever one that we didn’t plan.”

This method will eliminate the fires fueled by blowing embers — a method that must be approved by each homeowner, Shakar said.

“You’re not talking about burning all the trees,” Shakar said. “You’re talking about burning everything underneath that

can burn all the trees — all the leaf drop, all the brush. So we’re not trying to burn out all the trees; we’re trying to prevent that.”

After the prescribed burns are completed, the homeowners at Fontana View will have to continuously maintain the NC Firewise’s criteria for a certified Fire-

wise community. But for Shakar and the board of directors, it wasn’t just about qualifying for the certificate. It was about keeping their neck of the woods safe.

“We’ve done a lot of work to qualify for it — but not just to qualify for it, but because it’s the right thing to do,” Shakar said.